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Foreword: Dead Wood and Rushing Water: Essays on Mormon Faith, Family and Culture

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Dead Wood and Rushing Water

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Essays on Mormon Faith, Family, and Culture

Boyd Jay Petersen

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The essay is a form particularly well suited for Mormon writers, for it blends a number of their cultural and religious imperatives. We are a confessional people, in both senses of the word. In keeping with Augustine's principal employment of the term, we are committed to the public profession of our faith. Not merely as an act of evangelizing, but among the more reflective Saints, as an articulated meditation on our yearning for the divine, and a psalmic celebration of God's gifts. We are also confessional in the more conventional sense: journal keeping, the informality of Mormon worship, public testimony bearing, the intimacy and interdependency of ward life, all conspire to make us a people prone to self-revelation. The essay form allows a Mormon writer to do both at the same time: reveal the imprint of providential design in the vibrant though secret life along the rushing stream and in the father's blessing of his newborn child on the one hand, and on the other, to assess one's response to the mystery, one's own role in those designs, one's participation in the rhythms of life as a disciple, as a member of a family or partner in a marriage, and as a citizen in kingdoms earthly and heavenly.

The essay also suits Mormons because of its emphatically democratic history. As the form's French etymology suggests, an essay is "an attempt." It does not trumpet the credentials of the scientist to assure its authority, nor the erudition of the historian to enforce its conclusions. It lacks the finality of the treatise, the objectivity of the journal article, and the shrill call to action of the manifesto. Of course, its egalitarian nature can be its downfall. Not all personal ruminations deserve a public airing; those of Boyd Petersen do.

Two principle influences are evident in Boyd's essays. From Hugh Nibley, he has absorbed an acute social conscience, and a determination to disentangle Mormon doctrine from Mormon culture. At the same time, like Nibley, Boyd refuses to disentangle discipleship from politics (in the broad sense of the word). Discipleship is manifest in how we live, not how we think, which is why Boyd invests so many of his essays with a call for more, not less, integration of our religion into the full range of our endeavors and commitments.

Like Eugene England, Boyd has found an irenic style that stands out quietly but sharply in these times of divisive rhetoric. In his professional work, Boyd navigates stormy waters with particular grace and wisdom. He is unfailingly kind, unflappable in circumstances rife with tension, reliably steady. He

is a bridge builder. Boyd calls England "a member of the Radical Middle," but the appellation equally applies to himself. He sees the best in people on each side of the debates that swirl around and among us. Those qualities translate into a marvelous writing style. The most common motif in the following essays is the almost tender breaking down of walls erected by our own dread of difference, of our own fears of fallibility, our own fiercely-held because fearfully-held assumptions.

In his lovely essay on the Book of Mormon contained herein, Boyd notes that Latter-day Saints are uncomfortable living with mystery, with early Mormons especially "trying desperately" to remove it wherever they found it. Against Mormonism's cultural rhetoric of certainty, Boyd models his own unguarded and at times risky search for understanding. "My thoughts are tentative," he confides in a typical formulation. Boyd invites us all to ponder anew the verities we hold, sharing in his humility, tentativeness, and cheerful confidence that our paths will converge in the end.

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